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## U.S. set to pull out from S. Korea bases

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SEOUL -- By the end of this month, the American flag will be lowered on more than a half-dozen deteriorating encampments for U.S. Army soldiers who have kept armed vigil for more than five decades near the De-militarized Zone with North Korea.

The potential for conflict still looms: North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs seek to fortify the world's fifth-largest military. But U.S. military policy-makers -- to the nervousness of the South Korean government -- are counting on improvements in weapon technology to replace boots on the ground needed elsewhere, and hold the peace.

Before the Bush administration launched the invasion of Iraq, South Korea was the only place where U.S. M1A1 Abrams tanks kept their ammunition on board in case of sudden attack. But in the post-September 11 world, the U.S. military has faced severe manpower shortages, and keeping relatively idle troops in Korea observing the 1953 armistice seemed questionable.

"Leveraging technology allows us to be more efficient and capabilities-based, rather than numbers-based," said U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) spokesman Kevin Krejcarek. "Exercises and training rotations continue to sharpen warfighting capabilities. We have great capability to deploy strategic forces where needed."

The Pentagon plans to incrementally withdraw 12,500 of the 37,000 or so U.S. troops by 2008. About 3,600 troops from the 2nd Infantry Division along the DMZ were sent to Iraq this summer and will not return to South Korea; about 1,400 more will follow them this month.

The U.S. military also is consolidating its bases, and will vacate the Yongsan Military Reservation, a 630-acre military base in central Seoul, by 2008. The presence of a large U.S. base in the capital has been a long-standing concern of some Koreans who see it as a slight to their sovereignty.

Many 2nd Infantry Division units were at small camps created after the Korean War and were within mortar range of North Korea, putting them at immediate risk if war broke out. Nine of them will close before Jan. 1.

"I would say that proximity to the DMZ is not as important as it used to be, given the long reach of weapons systems and the fact that the U.S. likes to fight a mobile operation," said Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., author of several books on North Korean military capabilities. "We don't need to be there as a tripwire."

Through 2005, the United States has promised to spend \$11 billion on 150 systems to enhance its force in South Korea. Those investments will include introduction of the Stryker, a 19-ton, eight-wheel armored vehicle; upgrades to Patriot anti-missile systems, and use of unmanned aerial vehicles.

The United States initially wanted to complete the troop withdrawal by the end of next year. The timeline was extended after South Korea sought a delay, highlighting its dilemma: securing the country's national security while maintaining an equitable military and political alliance with the United States.

North Korean reaction has been sharp.

"The issue of reducing U.S. forces occupying Korea is merely an instrument to pressure or a snare to further strengthen its grip on South Korea," said a broadcast by Radio Pyongyang. "The South Korean authorities should abandon as soon as possible their submissive attitude toward the U.S. and assume the standpoint of self-independence of the nation."

South Korea has depended heavily on the United States for its defense, said Nick Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute, author of the "The End of North Korea." Seoul estimates it would have to double defense spending to maintain present capabilities if the United States pulled out completely, Mr. Eberstadt said.

USFK officials claim formidable capabilities. Marines from Okinawa can be brought in on high-speed ships within hours, Stryker units can be airlifted here within 11 hours, and military assets can be shipped from Saipan or Diego Garcia within days, they say.

The Air Force has B-52 bombers on Guam, part of continuing upgrades on that strategic isle. Navy and Marine F/A-18E-F Super Hornets provide all-weather nighttime precision-strike capabilities. F-117 Nighthawk stealth fighters were deployed to South Korea for exercises in July and last year.

"Capabilities have changed so significantly that it allows us to make changes in force levels and dispositions," said Mr. Krejcarek, the USFK spokesman.

A U.S. pullout might also crimp foreign investments; 2004 saw a \$2.6 billion investment by U.S. banking giant Citigroup and a \$1.2 billion investment by General Motors in South Korea. American officials have been quick to cite the U.S. military presence as a stabilizer allowing South Korea's phenomenal economic growth since the end of the war.

A pullout "would translate into high unemployment rates almost immediately for the young," Mr. Eberstadt said. "If the U.S. alliance is undermined with South Korea, the first people who will suffer financially are going to be the young kids."

The alliance has become increasingly strained by public strategy divisions in dealing with North Korea. The U.S. approach -- entering another four-year stretch after the re-election of President Bush -- is at odds with that of South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's government, which has muted criticism of its northern neighbor and pursued economic engagement.

But despite what is portrayed as rosier economic cooperation between North and South Korea, the South Korean Defense Ministry recently announced plans to increase military spending from 2.8 percent of gross domestic product to 3.2 percent. The move, expected to cost \$92.5 billion over the next four years, puts South Korea on par with most developed countries for defense spending as percentage of GNP -- usually around 3 percent.

"We decided to strengthen the role of South Korean military forces to defend our nation in the face of the reorganization of U.S. Forces Korea," Maj. Gen. Bang Hyo-bok told a press briefing for Korean news media last month.

Planned improvements by South Korea include Patriot missile batteries, Aegis destroyers and new satellites, officials said. But "the U.S. provides a lot of the glue that stitches" South Korea's defense systems together, said Mr. Bermudez, the expert on North Korean military capabilities.

"A lot of that both at sea and on land is heavily dependant on U.S. helicopter assets and special air assets which use cutting-edge U.S. technology," he added.

But both South Korea and the United States want at all cost to avoid all-out war with North Korea. Experts estimate tens of thousands of casualties at the onset of war and devastating long-term consequences.

"There is no military solution to this challenge we face with North Korea," U.S. Ambassador Christopher R. Hill recently told students at Korea University. "We need to find a diplomatic solution."

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